

The view from the fence: a dual perspective on assignment briefs

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Abstract

This opinion piece reflects on assessment from the dual perspective of academic and student. It offers a slightly tongue-in-cheek consideration of the common traditional written assessment and the potential dangers associated with 'too much' information delivered alongside the assignment brief. Specifically, it suggests that providing excessive supplementary information, while well intentioned, can be confusing to students. It acknowledges that co-development of assessment briefs may circumvent difficulties, but notes that relatively simple strategies may be used to ensure that students are empowered to recognise their own role in the assessment process.

The view from the fence

After a number of years as an academic, to have become a student again recently, as part of professional doctorate studies, has offered some interesting insights. Within a context that increasingly recognises the value of student partnership in assessment (Sambell and Graham, 2011), it is surprising to note that aspects of this core area of practice may still perpetuate a situation where learning happens *to* students instead of *with* them. This opinion piece offers a tongue-in-cheek insight into what it means to be assessed and how academics attempt (sometimes unhelpfully) to make assessments more accessible.

There is a great deal of learning that can be gleaned from the experience of simply being a student again. One of the single greatest points of personal learning (at this relatively early juncture) relates to the process of assessment. Above and beyond expected anxieties relating to scrutiny and deadlines, a significant amount of stress, it seems, can result from the manner in which the assessed task is presented and communicated in the form of the assignment brief.

It is, of course, important for assignment briefs to be presented clearly and cleanly in order to communicate what the student is required to do and what is expected of them as effectively as possible. However, designing an effective assignment brief can be challenging, not least of all because of the discourse gap that might exist between academics and students, particularly those from non-traditional backgrounds (Williams, 2005). Recent work from the Higher Education Academy (HEA) identifies assignment brief design as having received insufficient attention (Gilbert and Maguire, 2014). Academics may seek to address inadequacies in the brief by providing additional material: for example, well-intentioned accompanying notes or PowerPoint slides that are meant to clarify the assignment brief. Unfortunately, from a student perspective, the additional materials may themselves create further questions. Sometimes information is new, different or contradictory. This can be further aggravated in situations where large cohorts of students mean that multiple lecturers are responsible for guiding students through the assessment, with each creating her/his own supplementary briefs.

In the manner of an alien being, the additional materials themselves can spawn further sets of instructions and information: for example, reported conversations from someone who has

spoken with a tutor and hints (real or perceived) dropped in lectures. These may lack physical substance but can be equally irksome to the student who must spend time trying to collate a clear understanding of what is required of her/him instead of engaging with the assessed task. Having academic alter-egos has offered us only the thinnest protection from the experience of multiplying briefs and the added anxiety they can produce. How, then, do less confident students respond to their presence? There is some suggestion that students from 'widening-participation' backgrounds, who may lack confidence in their academic abilities, are particularly poorly served by inadequate briefs. Indeed, such students may be more inclined to blame themselves for what they perceive to be their own inadequacies, rather than look to faults in the manner in which they are being assessed (Rochon and Knight, 2013).

The lens of partnership offers some perspective. Multiplying briefs can be seen as symptomatic of an approach in which students have assessment 'done to them', in which the academic creates more instructions in order to provide, or attempt to provide, material they believe students require to complete a task. Effective assessment puts the students' learning at the centre of the experience (Hatzipanagos and Rochon, 2012), but when a brief becomes bloated with excessive detail or sub-documents, it can take over the process of assessment, obfuscating instead of clarifying. Furthermore, it implies that the academic holds all the answers, disempowering rather than enabling the student.

Within a context that recognises the value of partnership, the co-development of assessment briefs with students presents an obvious solution, and brings its own reward (Healey et al, 2014). In theory, co-developed briefs will obviate the need for additional materials, but, in practice, modules and briefs can be inherited. Dialogue, then, is a useful tool. Academics are not born knowing how to write an effective brief; questions from students may help to identify shortcomings where they exist. Instead of attempting to avoid dialogue by creating further materials, it is more useful to capture questions and engage with learners. Technology can play an essential role in ensuring that this process is both constructive and efficient through the creation of, for example, a central assignment forum where students can discuss or question the brief with one another and the lecturer. Such feedback during the assessment process can then complement dialogue and ensures that students are empowered to recognise their own role in learning.

For an academic, it is easy to become over reliant on the one-way communication system of a typical assignment brief. Adopting a more dialogic approach to assessment presents an opportunity to acknowledge students' place as partners within the process and the wider academic community.

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